

## REPORT

# Barcelona in Books

INTERNATIONAL AUTHORS NEVER  
FAIL TO BE INSPIRED BY THE CITY

*By Isabel Cocker*



*Illustration by Anna Baxter*

**M**any English speakers get their first introduction to Barcelona through George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), a book based on the author's time in the city during the Civil War, when "down the Ramblas, the wide central artery of the town where crowds of people streamed constantly to and fro, the loud-speakers were bellowing revolutionary songs all day and far into the night". Barcelona may have changed significantly since the Thirties, but the city has continued to be an inspiration for authors from across the world, enthralled by its history, culture and unique atmosphere.

Dan Brown, the author of *Da Vinci Code* (2003), found inspiration for his latest novel in the architecture of the Sagrada Família, calling it "a shrine to evolution, a shrine to the organic world" in a BBC interview last year. The latest in the Robert Langdon series, *Origin* (2017) is based in the city and is an exploration of religion and science, of the old and the new—something which Barcelona combines successfully.

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Like much of Spain, religious beliefs underpin much of the Catalan culture, yet the city is also uniquely progressive in its scientific thinking. Barcelona houses one of the world's most powerful supercomputers, the MareNostrum in the Centro Nacional de Supercomputación, and plays host to the annual World Mobile Congress. It is a fast-evolving city but still has its roots buried in the past, and this intriguing cultural juxtaposition is recognisable as a theme in the many books inspired by the city.

One such work is the popular novel *The Girl from Barcelona* (2017) by Peter Woodbridge, a Canadian businessman who has lived in the city for five years. His first published work, the political thriller darts between events in Barcelona, Madrid, North Africa and Syria

following a terrorist plot hatched by Al-Qaeda and a neo-fascist group based in Spain. It is soon to be followed by two further books that will complete the trilogy.

Woodbridge was inspired by recent political and economic events, by "Spain's contradictions" and by the "tension" he feels in the city. "There's a constant buzz of excitement in the air ... [but] at times, the city feels like a tightly coiled metal spring," he said. "I find it fascinating that Barcelona's tensions give rise to such an outpouring of artistic creativity. Visually, there are examples of it everywhere... colourful graffiti, provocative back street art and unapologetically partisan flags draped over apartment balconies."

Woodbridge is not the only foreign-resident author to have found inspiration in current political events. After becoming disillusioned by the way that the Catalan struggles were being written (or, not written) about in the British press, journalist Matthew Tree published *Barcelona, Catalonia: A View from the Inside* (2011). The English writer has lived in the city for more than 30 years, reporting for *The Times* and *The Guardian* and writing for Catalan press. Tree wrote the non-fiction book to raise awareness of Catalunya's unique identity in Spain and because he believes that "Catalunya will only be understood abroad if it is independent".

Looking at the issue from a different point of view, Raphael Minder's book *The Struggle for Catalonia* (2017), considers why Catalan separatism reached such a climactic point within the Spanish political sphere, and how it can be linked to a more general sense of unease in Europe. The writer, who is a former *Financial Times* columnist and the current *New York Times* Spanish correspondent, has been praised for the objectivity with which he has analysed the divisive issue.

For other writers, there is inspiration to be found whilst working within the busy commercial hub of the city. Vincent Werner, a Dutch businessman with 17 years living in Spain, turned to writing to catalogue what he sees as the seven problematic characteristics of Spanish commerce. *It Is Not What It Is: The Real (s)Pain Of Europe* (2017) is based on testimonies and newspaper clippings that Werner gathered during 15 years of working in Barcelona and across Spain, setting up banks and other high-end businesses. Written in English to appeal to business owners and foreign resident investors, he hopes the book will act as a "wake-up call" for Spain.

The work is a critical portrayal of Spanish business practices, which has led to Werner receiving reactionary comments both in the Spanish press and by readers who feel that, as a foreigner, he is not qualified to judge. "Suddenly I'm a rebel, just because I come from a different country," he said. "I don't just offer criticism—I also offer solutions. Despite the criticism, I've also had hundreds of Spanish people thanking me for my work."

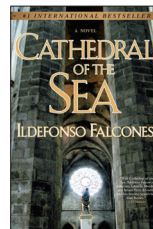
Werner may have got in trouble with the Spanish press, but at least he didn't have to worry about being on the wrong side of the law. Ivor Thomas, an English resident of Barcelona, was inspired to write his latest novel, *One Last Deal* (2018), by a man he met at a dinner party in the city—who turned out to be a conman and a fugitive. The book follows the man and his family through the trials and tribulations caused by his nebulous dealings, although Thomas was quick to verify that, for legal reasons, the work was only “loosely inspired by” this interesting acquaintance. “I was mainly inspired by the city, which has an enormously creative history. I only started writing when I arrived in Barcelona, and this is now my second novel.”

Woodbridge, Werner and Thomas all only released their first books after arriving in Barcelona. For Woodbridge, it was the cultural richness of the city, the combination of history with a buzzing metropolis which “energises the desire to write”. It is the city's people that inspire Thomas: you can go to a dinner party, meet 20 guests, and come back with 20 new themes.

English writer Christina Bradbury wrote her novel before arriving in Spain—moving to Barcelona enabled her to find the space and time to print, publish and sign with an agent. Her book, *Thirty* (2018), is a light summer read exploring the internal crisis of a woman who is about to hit her fourth decade, without the job, man or life she had imagined for herself. “It's loosely based on feelings that I had when I was turning 30,” Bradbury laughed. “But this generational freak-out is a universal theme which I thought needed to be captured.”

Ernest Hemingway wrote in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) that “for one person who likes Spain there are a dozen who prefer books on her.” Almost 90 years on, these narratives continue to be written. For the many foreign residents based in Barcelona, there is inspiration to be found in the streets, the architecture, the history and daily conversations with people in the community. There are still stories to be told, themes to be explored and novels to be written. These books, some worthwhile reads for summer beach days, are only a taste of what can be found in the city. ■

## SUMMER READS BASED IN THE CITY



### Cathedral of the Sea (2006)

- Ildefonso Falcones

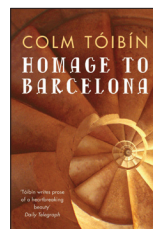
This spellbinding novel chronicles the life of a worker from the Ribera and his ascent through medieval society. Set in the 14th century at the height of the Inquisition, it uses the construction of the famous workers' church, Santa María del Mar, as a backdrop.



### Colour of a Dog Running Away (2005)

- Richard Gwyn

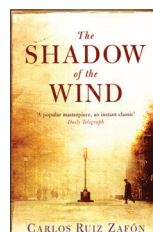
This poetic thriller by Welsh lecturer Richard Gwyn weaves an adventurous riddle through the city, and reads as a love letter to the author's former home.



### Homage to Barcelona (1992)

- Colm Tóibín

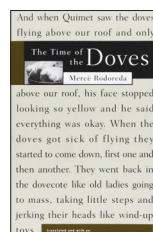
An alternative history of the city, this non-fiction book examines the events and the people which have shaped Barcelona since its founding more than 2000 years ago. Written in 1990, it doesn't explore recent conflicts but sets a solid groundwork for understanding the unique culture of the city through its earlier history.



### Shadow of the Wind (2001)

- Carlos Ruiz Zafón

In the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, a young boy finds a mystical novel that takes him on surprising adventures around the city. A thrilling read for young and old alike, the novel was extended into a series, with the final book expected to be released in November.



### The Time of the Doves (1962)

- Mercè Rodoreda

Perhaps the most famous contemporary novel written in Catalan, this tale by exiled writer Mercè Rodoreda is notable for its lyrical style and stream of consciousness narrative. It tells the personal history of a woman and her relationships throughout the Spanish Civil War.

